Rewriting the Mafioso: The Gangster Hero in the Work of Puzo, Coppola, and Rimanelli

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Non siamo ricchi di denaro, ma siamo ricchi di sangue.

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INTRODUCTION

During the early to mid-1900s, an infatuation with the "gangster" grew in American popular culture. In response to historical events of the early twentieth century that polarized the United States class system, especially the Great Depression, those in the growing lower class became fascinated with actual and fictional figures that could demonstrate the ability to live "in-between;" that is, anyone who did not benefit from corporate capitalism but, rather, from standing on the dangerous middle ground between the classes, challenging economic, ethnic, and even legal boundaries. Both fictional and nonfictional figures of the "gangster" arose in American media in the form of a hyper-masculine character who could transform his humble origins into a luxurious life by committing brilliantly brutal crimes with bravado. As the gangster became more established over the course of the following decades and expanded in popularity beyond the original working-class audience, the gangster also became a nostalgic figure who offered a sense of tradition, which in part accounts for the gangster's continuing popularity in modern media. As the first chapter explains, due to the association of southern Italian immigrants with crime and patriarchy in the United States, gangster and mafia fiction most largely concern southern Italians and Italian-Americans. Since its inception, the Italian-American gangster hero, or the "Mafioso," has commanded a strong following among American audiences. Due to

the saliency of the Mafioso figure and the widespread influence of the genre, both the figure and the narrative merit critical discussion and analysis.

The first chapter of the following article outlines the ways in which traditional mafia fiction, epitomized by Puzo and Coppola's sensational *The Godfather*, extrapolates from historical phenomena, like the hyphenate individual, with the tools of genre fiction in order to craft the classical Mafioso. The chapter considers the reliance of the Mafioso on such elements as *bella figura* and *omertà*, as well as socio-cultural norms assigned to Italian-Americans in the media, and considers the characteristics of the Mafioso by examining the character system present in *The Godfather*. In outlining the evolution of the Mafioso character, the first chapter explores what it means for the character of the gangster hero to perpetuate the values that once popularized it.

In response, the second chapter provides a close reading of the work of parodist and multi-genre writer Giose Rimanelli, who takes bold and innovative steps in questioning the mafia narrative in his novel *Benedetta in Guysterland*. Rimanelli, a writer undoubtedly more focused on high-literary intertextuality than a genre writer, includes characters branded by the same traditional elements of *The Godfather*'s Mafioso but, instead of aggrandizing the Mafioso in the traditional fashion, utilizes these elements to question the foundation upon which classical mafia fiction relies. The chapter explicates Rimanelli's clever use of referential

language, unique narrative structure, and complex characters in order to analyze the ways in which Rimanelli demonstrates the potential for Italian-American literature to evolve. The chapter discusses Rimanelli's recognition and distortion of mafia fiction tropes, scrutinizing key characters, and ultimately assays the potential for expansion in the mafia fiction genre.

By providing a close reading of two texts, related in content but highly divergent in their method and objective, this article juxtaposes the historical Mafioso against his reexamined counterpart. Through an analysis of the history and canonical figuration of the gangster hero in *The Godfather*, and an examination of Rimanelli's extensive reworking, the following two chapters call readers to recognize the historical context in which the Mafioso formed and rethink the literary outcomes of reinventing the tradition of both the character and the narrative.

CHAPTER ONE

The Hyphenate Individual Becoming the Gangster Hero

During the late nineteenth century and turn of the twentieth century, a newfound obsession with "the gangster hero" phenomenon formulated in American popular subculture as a response to incoming populations of immigrants with "hyphenate identity," increasing audiences' sympathy for the criminal figure in literature.[1] The concept of the Italian-American as the original "hyphenate individual," coined by Daniel Aaron in his essay "The Hyphenate Writer and American Letters," in part constitutes the background of popularization of the Italian-American gangster hero.[2] In order to analyze the gangster hero and his

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[1] As Whipple identifies in *Romance of Rascality,* "The fact that a man excites moral reprobation is his claim upon our sympathy." (Whipple 11). Similarly, Reynolds writes, "Subversive fiction, much of whaich has been overlooked by previous scholars, enacted fully the wild cultural forces that were evaded or glossed over in the other types of fiction…. [one] forged a new irrational style aimed at reproducing the rebellious, savage forces of American culture; and its unmasking of the social elite was enforced…" [Reynolds, David. "The Sensational Press and the Rise of Subversive Literature." *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print., 183]

[2] Aaron, Daniel. "The Hyphenate Writer and American Letters." *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (July 1964): 213-7; later revised in *Rivista di Studi Anglo-Americani* 3.45 (1984-5): 11-28.

subsequent career in popular fiction and film, it is important to understand the ethnic framework that enabled the Mafioso[3] to emerge as an attractive character to American populations in subsequent decades. By addressing the problem of assimilation found in Italian-America, mafia literature recognizes and resolves the Italian-American hyphenate identity by crafting a space where "in-between" characters can be both fully ethnic and fully American. The gangster figure thus relies on, and hijacks, the hyphenate identity of Italian-Americans to formulate a porous literary space where ethnicity, morality, and legality can interact and configure an attractive reality that renders the economically, racially, and socially hyphenated heroic, even when considered criminal or violent.

For the purposes of this argument, the hyphenate individual will refer to the vague parameters concerning the immigrant and literary identity of Italian-Americans, as well as the representative space and borders transgressed by Italian-Americans in twentieth-century literature. Because the gangster figure is the most popularly salient figure of the hyphenate Italian immigrant, an understanding of the historical fragmentation of Italian-America is essential to an understanding of mafia narratives. Fragmentation of Italian identity is clear in film and literature, particularly in the consistent use of hyphenated or divided compound phrases, ranging from "Italian-American, "Southern-Italian, "Sicilian-Italian," and "Sicilian-

[3] Mafioso herein meaning the Southern-Italian gangster figure.

American" to "organized crime," "Sicilian mafia," and "mafia femme." By dissecting the American problem of assimilation from the perspective of those held at "hyphen's length" from the Anglo-American community, critics like Aaron analyze the resulting alienation experienced by first-wave, non-white (or, rather, problematically "white") immigrants.[4] Recognition of the history of Italian-Americans' alienation enables gangster fiction audiences to explore the social schema that originally imagined the Mafioso, as well as the frameworks that the Mafioso eventually constructs and reinforces.

As historian and literary critic Anthony Tamburri points out, this hyphenate identity came as a result of "older North Americans' hesitation to accept the newcomer."[5] Due to the concurrent northern migration of African-Americans and the immigration of Afro-Caribbeans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans, "Italians belonged to the first wave of dark-skinned or 'non-white' immigrants."[6] By means of this "hyphenation," such immigrants were historically unable to absorb an immediate American identity. Despite Italian immigrants' later transition from

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[4] Vellon, Peter. *"'Between White Men and Negroes: The Perception of Southern Italian Immigrants through the Lens of Italian Lynchings, "*27.

[5] Tamburri, *Semiotic of Ethnicity,* 66.

[6] Mangione, Jerre, and Ben Morreale. *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience.* New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. Print, 26.

being "long-headed, dark 'Mediterranean' race of short stature,"[7] to being part of the white majority, mafia literature reveals a lack of discursive power for Italian immigrants, who were unable to participate effectively in their own representation as a culture that could exist apart from hyphenation and criminal association.[8] Both national and literary histories reflect the convenience of utilizing Italian-American characters in the crafting of mafia fiction due to the population's hyphenate ability to occupy an accessible yet distant space and, as a result, the gangster figure became a staple in the depiction of southern Italian and Sicilian identity.

In *La Storia*, Mangione and Morreale provide an example of the hyphenate phenomenon in their examination of discontinuous Italian nationality, which prevented full American assimilation for southerners (particularly, Neapolitans, Calabrians, and Sicilians). In their discussion of intra-Italo racism, Mangione and Morreale note that, "Immigrants from Northern Italy…from birth had been

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[7] Vellon, Peter. "*'Between White Men and Negroes: The Perception of Southern Italian Immigrants through the Lens of Italian Lynchings,'*"27.

[8] Additionally: "Warfare between the United States and Italy could hardly fail to hold the public's attention. Careful observers of the urban ghettos in which crime is rampant generally disregard any ethnic explanation for crime, preferring instead to concentrate upon the poverty of the ghetto inhabitants rather than their nationality." [Bandonella, Peter. *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and Sopranos*. London: A&C Black, 2004. Print, 173].

conditioned to regard southerners as an inferior breed—that southern Italians, Sicilians especially, were an undesirable lot, who had neither the wish nor the capacity to assimilate into the American population."[9] Thus, southern Italian immigrants, as well as their descendants, faced the problem of assimilating not only into American communities, but into northern Italian communities already present in the United States. In this moment, Mangione and Morreale highlight an important dynamic existent in southern Italian-American culture; while Northern, white Italians resisted southern Italian affiliation, Sicilians were hesitant to accept American identity for fear of relinquishing their heritage. This hesitancy, as well as association with dark-skinned "others," created the space in which the discourse of hyphenate identity could unfold. The foundations of mafia identity emerge from a simultaneous hesitancy to assimilate and need to be racially "invisible," in the face of rejection from other Italian communities.

The rise of various Sicilian mafias in large cities like New York, Chicago, and New Orleans associated American immigrants from southern Italy with crime, corruption, and patriarchy, while the division of Italian-Americans from the majority of wealthy Anglo-Saxons, who were seen by the growing lower class as "hoarders" of American wealth, helped them to garner sympathy from other immigrant, minority, and lower-income, populations whom the Great Depression

[9] Mangione and Morreale 27.

relegated in the lower class. In this way, the Mafioso became popular in multiple genres, as the figure's polysemous nature performed different cultural functions for a variety of ideological communities. As Messenger remarks, in the case of the Mafioso, the gangster hero was attractive to audiences in the mid-twentieth century that understood that "ethnic identity and family unity are the only stays against disaster in American. The 'common good' is a naïve fantasy."[10] To audiences who could idealize the appearance of corruption without immorality, and hardship without passivity, the construction of Italian-American gangster heroes who could occupy the "in-between" naturally became appealing. Consequently, literature and film utilized the hyphenate Italian-American as a backdrop against which complex relationships between family, immigration, and ethnicity could develop. The popularization of such relationships in fiction fortified the image of the Mafioso, who could maneuver each complexity with masculine power and authority.

The shifting of the gangster identity in and out of heroism illustrates the consistency with which history and fiction reshape and forge Italian-Americana in the twentieth century. To describe a major modification in identity and cultural memory, Gardaphé argues that Italian-Americans traded cultural identity for the

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[10] Messenger, Christian. *The Godfather and American Culture: How the Corleones Became "our Gang"*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002. Print. SUNY Series in Italian/American Culture , 39.

prospects of assimilation into the "invisible" category of American whiteness. He argues:

> "In spite of sharing the experiences of other minorities…many [Italian-Americans] have adopted the attitudes and stances of the dominant culture of racism, a culture that maintains control by dividing by difference and uniting by illusion of similarity. By becoming white, they have paid a price, and that price is the extinction of their culture… It is the near extinction of Italian-American culture that has enabled them to become invisible."[11]

Early- and mid- twentieth-century literature contemplates this trading of tradition for acceptance in its representation of second-generation Italian-Americans. As the viewpoints of generations following the Great Migration and the Great Arrival[12] shifted in their attitudes toward the process of assimilation, the process by which the hyphenate "loses" the hyphen of identity became less important than social and economic affluence. Second-generation Italian-Americans are of particular significance to crime fiction critics, as they often constitute the heroes of America's most fashionable mafia narratives, and represent the ways that gangster fiction has been ushered into mid-twentieth century literature. The majority of productions

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[11] *Ibid 1.*

[12] In reference to the mass movement of African-American to the Northern, Midwest, and Western United States (here referenced, 1910-1950), the movement of large waves of southern Italian-American populations to the United States (1880s-1920s) – respectively.

that compose the mafia fiction canon, such as the autobiographical *Donnie Brasco*, Rosenthal's *A Bronx Tale*, and Puzo and Coppola's *The Godfather* series, feature multiple generations of Italian immigrants and Italian-Americans as a means of teasing out this identity, and utilizing the process of de-hyphenation to value the Mafioso.

The feminist and gender equality movements that gained traction in 1960s and 1970s put pressure on American conceptions of masculinity, especially those associated with unabashedly patriarchal subcultures. Gardaphé argues that the transformation of the gangster hero into the fully ethnic American "godfather" stemmed from new challenges to traditional manhood, patriarchy and heterosexuality, commenting, "The Italian-American man evidences a traditional patriarchal sense of manhood derived from a European model that confronted an American model of manhood."[13] Exemplifying this paradox is the Mafioso, who is undaunted by the new, rooted in tradition, and protected by his attentiveness to ethnohistorical tradition.

Considering that the construction of the Mafioso, as modern literature and film now perceive him, takes partial root in sentiments of masculine insecurity, it is unsurprising that the Mafioso has come to represent that which is not only a-feminine, but the opposite of femininity. The discourse of the fictional gangster

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[13] *Ibid* 18.

hero thus represents everything male, Italian, and American, satisfying immigrant interests in the mutual blending and preservation of identity that escaped many in the early and mid 1900s. Further, the Mafioso engages American audiences by responding in fantasy to their qualms about virility. In *From Wiseguys to Wise Men,* Gardaphé comments on *The Godfather* as a response to these qualms, stating, "In the hands of American artists, especially those of Italian descent, the gangster represents the last stand for patriarchy in America, and a chance for Americans to relive a known past as they head into an unknown future."[14] Critics most aptly examine this protective ethnic loyalty and American gratification through an analysis of those elements typical of hyphenate individuals, historical mobsters, and fictional mafia figures.

Puzo's *The Godfather*, and later, Coppola's film *The Godfather,* taken together as a single meta-text,[15] offers an image of Italian-American ethnicity that roots itself in legal and illegal infrastructures within the United States, while expanding notions of home to include both New York and Sicily. Gardaphé argues that, "The central conflict of *The Godfather* is how to keep the family together and 'Sicilian' for its own good in a land that has lost its dependence on the family unit

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[14] *Ibid* 20.

[15] Herein after, both shall be referred to as *The Godfather* as intended to represent the phenomenon of the novel and film.

for survival."[16] Indeed, the most continuous point of definition for the Corleone family under the rule of Don Vito is the emphasis on maintaining a family that can maneuver American authority and preserve traditional Sicilian values. Gardaphé, like many others, argues that character systems found in Puzo and Coppola's sensational *The Godfather* are the most emblematic embodiment of the American Mafioso as ethno-masculine gangster hero.[17] Vito Corleone, one of the most notorious godfather figures in the canon of mafia fiction, exemplifies these traits and thus frequently comes under ethnomasculine criticism. Critic Christian Messenger responds to the sensation of Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, stating, "*The Godfather* decrees that, in America, one can achieve anything through force without denying origins or becoming legally or morally culpable. An immigrant can retain ethnic identity and yet succeed in America beyond belief in an open society without becoming 'open' him- or herself."[18] The "complete" Mafioso is capable of anything, including simultaneous audacity, retention of ethnic identity, and full fiscal and social responsibility. Indeed, the modern Mafioso is fully American, Italian, male and sympathetic. Critics may

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[16] Gardaphé 37.

[17] Gardaphé 21.

[18] Messenger 174. Also: Bandonella 176: "Prohibition produced the immense and previously unheard-of wealth that launched truly organized crime in America. And it is undeniable that Italian American criminals played a major role in the rise of this phenomenon in the 1920s and the 1930s."

consider the novel and film in terms of Christian Messenger's "ethnic semiosis" to examine various inversions and systems of ethnic renewal in *The Godfather*.

In order to understand what Puzo and Coppola seek to achieve in their creation of the gangster hero, Messenger highlights two elements, both stylistic and content-specific, through which Italian-American fiction can be read. The first of the "ethnic semiotic" elements is, *bella figura* or "the attention to form of presentation governing social situations and the code that expresses an individual's public utterance and social script."[19] In identifying this characteristic, Messenger points out the resonance of Sicilian formalities and the means by which mafia communication stems from a social script rooted in performance. By maintaining this tradition, the Corleone's and other mafia heroes shuffle ethnic barriers, maintaining the power to be effectively "Italian" while maneuvering American authority. Messenger's second element, *omertà*, references the code of silence, which Messenger describes as, "a characteristic of Southern Italian culture and a cornerstone of powerful male authority in negotiation where euphemism is as close to revelation as a speaker gets and a host of aphoisms countenance public silence."[20] In this moment, Messenger links silence and cultural understanding to not only mafia systemic influence, but to the inner structure of the family.

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[19] Messenger 113.

[20] Messenger 121.

According to these elements, gangster heroes renew ethnic patriarchy and assert an allegiance to Italian culture through masculinity. As Messenger later states, "The largest fiction that The Godfather allows its readers to inhabit is that of enormous and unqualified American security and success: the fantasy of a self-reliant, upward mobility within a total identity in family."[21] Messenger recognizes the ways that these elements allow the reader to understand the melodramatic format of *The Godfather* and the manner in which they meet the retention of cultural tradition with a historically formulated American idealism, often to quite fictional ends. Ferraro's criticism appears to correspond, and he often remarks on the significance of Sicilian traditions to the persona of the mafia and Mafioso in popular media. Ferraro writes in regards to Puzo and Coppola,

> *The Godfather* is saturated with the imagery of paternity, family, and intimate friendship; with the rhetoric of respect, loyalty, and the code of silence; with references to Sicilian blood and the machismo attributed to it; with the social events- -weddings, christenings, funerals, meals, and so forth—that embody the culture of family honor. The business of crime is always interlaced with the responsibilities of family.[22]

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[21] Messenger 174.

[22] Ferraro, Thomas. *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America.* 1st ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Print, 21.

Thus, Ferraro's explanation of the importance of intermingling ethnic roots with responsibility reveals the reliance of the Mafioso on tradition. The existence of this dependency complicates the literary role of the character, as immigration assimilation becomes increasingly important during the twentieth century.

Through an extension of these elements, the hyphenated male figure (and mafia hero) retains its roots in a manner worthy of cultural appreciation, and through such adherence comes to more skillfully manipulate American society; in short, the elements of *bella figura* and *omertà* establish the means by which the Italian-American pushes out of hyphenation. Messenger discusses this spectacle and reviews its prevalence in the work of Puzo and Coppola, stating, "*The Godfather* decrees that, in America, one can achieve anything through force without denying origins or becoming legally or morally culpable. An immigrant can retain ethnic identity and yet succeed in America beyond belief in an open society without becoming 'open' him- or herself."[23] Thus, in mafia fiction, the Italian-American male is ethnically, fiscally and filially inculpable. He carries his Sicilian legacy into full appreciation, tending to immigrant anxieties through his perfect manipulation of America, yet loses nothing in his constant maintenance of tradition.

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[23] Messenger 174.

By means of a complex system of characters, representing varying combinations of masculinity, ethnic identity, Americanism, and morality, *The Godfather* critically depicts the perfect Mafioso. In distinguishing mafia heroes from Italian-Americans, *The Godfather* comments on what it means to be American, and what it means to stay true to Sicilian tradition in the process. Further, by situating female characters like Carmela, Connie, Apollonia, and Kate as peripheral characters in the lives of the Mafiosi and the schematic of organized crime within the family, *The Godfather* lends itself to a conversation about the ways in which the struggle for control in organized crime and the construction of Italian-American masculinity through the gangster hero comes at the expense of the Italian-American woman.

The Character System in *The Godfather*

The character system of *The Godfather,* featuring Vito Corleone, Santino Corleone, Tom Hagen, Michael Corleone, and Virgil "the Turk" Sollozzo, takes shape around the work of assigning value to those traits that, throughout the narrative, constitute the heroic ideal of the Mafioso. Although audiences often consider Vito and Michael Corleone the truest embodiments of the American mafia hero, upon closer inspection, a more complete depiction of that which

constitutes the true Mafioso is readily available in the complex system of counterbalancing traits distributed among a larger set of characters in both the text and film. While the Corleone family comprises the majority of the system, an illustration of the Mafioso is only achieved comparatively; the narrative adds counterweights by means of anti-heroes, such as Santino and the Turk. *The Godfather* emphasizes existing values and vices in each character as a means of aggregating the perfect Mafioso who embodies true masculinity, true morality, true ethnicity, and a dually complete Italian-American identity. Some critics, like Huisman in *The Godfather Doctrine*, even go as far to suggest that each member in the character system epitomizes a different political ideology, and demonstrates the geographic and intellectual rooting of the Corleones in the United States by outlining the correlations between political philosophies and different members of *The Godfather* character system. By examining the correlations between the characters and the literary world they inhabit, readers gain a sense of the broad ideological appeal and consequently persistent traits of the Mafioso.

It is clear that Don Vito Corleone embodies, in both versions of *The Godfather*, the truly ethical and imperfectly ethnic. While Gardaphé claims "Don Corleone is the first fictional gangster who is not presented as a psychopath," it might be keener to state that Vito was among the primary exemplars of an amiable

Mafioso.[24] Through strict attendance to justice, Vito regulates not only his own family, but all those who fall under his authority. Although he struggles in his attempts to reconcile the Italian and American aspects of his family – as well as the traditional and progressive forms of his family "business" – it is ultimately Vito's propensity for justice that wins over the audience. As a means of illustrating Vito's predilection for social control, *The Godfather* most notably positions a variety of characters around Vito who underscore his greatest qualities and inimitable power as a godfather.[25] Puzo describes Vito as "a man to whom everybody came for help, and never were they disappointed," a mafia hero who "made no empty promises."[26] In the face of a world where money, rather than righteousness, governs judiciary systems, audiences acknowledge Vito's reign as the truest ethical marker. As Thompson comments in his introduction to the novel, "Don Corleone's ability to deliver implies that he is not just the Godfather, but in fact God."[27] Thompson identifies the intimate relationship that *The Godfather* cultivates between Vito and his audience, pointing out that in both the text and film, the godfather Vito is mystical in nature, indeed, "knows every feather that falls from the tail of a

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[24] Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men*, 21.

[25] Ex: Barzini is less intelligent, etc.

[26] Puzo 11.

[27] Thompson, Introduction to *Benedetta in Guysterland*, 4.

sparrow,"[28] and asks only "that you, you yourself, proclaim your friendship" in return for his kindness.[29] In positioning Vito as an all-knowing dispenser of justice, *The Godfathe*r legitimizes his authority as a leader and provides a schematic of power that removes legality from questions of morality.

From the first scene in *The Godfather*, Vito characterizes a confusing clashing of identities, as readers note that he is the most significantly mortal character of the Mafioso system. The age of Vito is in constant reference – as Sollozzo comments, "The Don, rest in peace, was slippin'. Ten years ago, could I have gotten to him?' – so as to connect the life, reign, and death of Vito to the rise and fall of his "old ways" of mafia and Sicilian tradition. Vito's mortality spreads out over considerable length in the film and text, calling audiences to recognize the explicit connection between the transience of the Don, the narrative plot, and the drama of configuring mafia power. Just as Vito Corleone in the first half of *The Godfather* "epitomize[s] a power structure that has stood the test of time,"[30] so does his downfall signal a shifting in the hierarchy of ethnic traditions that separately ground Italianism and Americanism, and thereby constitute hyphenate identity.

Messenger and Tamburri identify the key aspects of performance that popularize Vito as a Mafioso. Vito's perpetuation of the historically Sicilian ethic of

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[28] Puzo 138.

[29] Puzo 11.

[30] Huisman, 22.

distrust reveals an innate system that values ethnic justice over police authority. In the opening scene of Coppola's film, both of Messenger's identified elements, *omertà* and *bella figura*, emerge as crucial components of Vito's influence. In the scene, Bonasera complains that, "I went to the police, like a good American…. They [the criminals who raped my daughter] went free that very day. I stood in the courtroom like a fool and those two bastards, they smiled at me. And I said to my wife, 'For justice, we must go to Don Corleone.'"[31] Vito's first words of the film are his response: "You went to the police? Why didn't you come to me first?"[32] Despite Vito's love for America (indeed, the first words of Coppola's film are "I believe in America"),[33] his priority is always the maintenance of Sicilian justice, and the silence of *omertà*. Audiences may thereby observe the interactions of ethnicity and law, which Michael makes clearer in the novel by considering his father's criminal history.

In an attempt to generate an admiration for the Corleones, Puzo explicates the complex relationship between folklore, cultural mistrust of authority, and Catholic identity for Southern Italians; as the story unfolds in America, a search for

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[31] Coppola.

[32] Coppola.

[33] Also: "I believe in America. Americans made my fortune. And I raised my daughter in the American fashion. I gave her freedom but I taught her never to dishonor her family." (Coppola).

true identity and security takes root in an unknown "capitalist" territory. Puzo provides a number of metaphors and contradictions that serve as a working ground for those wishing to unpack the relationship between ethnicity and justice in *The Godfather*:

> In this antique garden, Michael Corleone learned about the roots from which his father grew. That the word 'Mafia' had originally meant place of refuge. Then it became the name for the secret organization that sprang up to fight against the rulers who had crushed the country and its people for centuries. Sicily was a land that had been more cruelly raped than any other in history. The Inquisition had tortured rich and poor alike. The landowning barrons and the prices of the Catholic Church exercised absolute power over the shepherds and farmers. The police were the instruments of their power and so identified with them that to be a policeman is the foulest insult one Sicilian can hurl at another.[34]

In this moment, Michael considers his father in a passage that combines fact and fiction, much like the Mafioso himself. Offering an (inaccurate) etymological root for "mafia,"[35] Michael's view of his father mimics that which Puzo hoped would

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[34] Puzo 323-324.

[35] While the etymological roots of the word "mafia" are unknown, the most likely root of the word is the Sicilian *mafiusu* from the Arabic *mahyas*, meaning "to brag" in the sense of aggressive boldness.

turn Vito and the Corleones into mafia heroes—Vito's own son sees him as a forgivable and honorable criminal, masculine and sympathetic. Puzo writes, "Michael Corleone understood for the first time why men like his father chose to become thieves and murderers, rather than members of the legal society. The poverty and fear and degradation were too awful to be acceptable to any man of spirit. And in America some emigrating Sicilians had assumed there would be equally cruel authority."[36] Thus, Michael himself modifies Vito's masculinity and highlights for readers the ethnic complexity that challenges Vito as a Mafioso.

It is Vito's inability to fully reconcile Siciliana and Americana, however, which determines his downfall. In his discussion of assimilation in *From Wise Guys to Wise Men,* Gardaphé asserts, "Even though assimilation to mainstream culture may be inevitable, if it happens on the immigrant's terms, it can be less traumatic and more regarding, especially if that immigrant profits by utilizing what he or she can from the source culture. An Italian-American culture hero, then, should defy total assimilation."[37] In this passage, Gardaphé identifies and analyzes the laborious difficulty facing hyphenate immigrants and the tradition of assimilative resistance to which Vito adheres. *The Godfather* deals with this same phenomenon by offering multiple faces of the Mafioso, starting with the firmly Sicilian Don Vito; yet, American greed, taking the form of the amazingly profitable

[36] Puzo 325.

[37] Gardaphh5.*From Wiseguys to Wise Men*, 129.

narcotics business in *The Godfather*, supersedes any power cultivated by Vito's honorable system of rule. Because Vito's enforcement of justice relies heavily on his entrenchment in Sicilian culture, his inability to adapt to American aggression results in a nearly successful attempt on his life and his displacement as an authoritative Mafioso. Again, readers find the narrative intrinsically historic, as the shots that usher Vito towards death compare to previous attempts on the Don's life. Readers recall Michael's previous reference to attempted assassination of the Don:

> 'Nearly fifteen years ago some people wanted to take over my father's oil importing business. They tried to kill him and nearly did. Luca Brasi went after them. The story is that he killed six men in two weeks and that ended the famous olive oil war.' He smiled as if it were a joke…. 'Fifteen years ago,' Michael said. 'Everything's been peaceful since then.'[38]

Michael's cavalier re-telling of the previous attack on Vito makes consistent reference to time—the phrase "fifteen years ago" appearing multiple times – and unmistakably affiliates the Don with traditional capitalism in referencing his "oil business." Indeed, the passage pairs the Don with "oil," a commodity booming in the 1960s, in crisis in the 1970s, and intimately linked to global politics (the founding of OPEC in 1960), but specifies his affiliation with *Italian* olive oil. In this

[38] Puzo 23-24.

way, Puzo makes an obvious pun on both American capitalism and Italian stereotypes. By juxtaposing American economics and Italian culture in a scene of the past, Puzo appears to be making a statement about the misplacement of Vito's approach to bicultural business. Further, by recalling Michael's joke about his father's mortality, readers are later able to separate the previous success of the "old ways" from their inapplicability in the following generation, and might trace such changes through the ultimate downfall of Vito Corleone at the hands of the Turk Sollozzo.

Through Michael's description, Vito Corleone actualizes the "old ways," and through a critically political lens, the reliance on bourgeois discipline. Huisman argues that the striking down of Vito Corleone, who is "emblematic of Cold War American power,"[39] by forces which he does not completely understand demonstrates the fear of rushing political change which Americans experienced during the 1970s. The establishment of this fear sets up Michael Corleone as the ultimate Mafioso who, to an extent even greater than that of his God-like father, can bridge the gap between the old ways and new practices or, as Huisman suggests, usher in a way of "realism" historically grounded in the political frontier of the 196 and 1970s.[40] The anti-heroes Santino and Sollozzo, who complete the composite portrait of the ultimate Mafioso, make Vito and Michael primarily

[39] Huisman 23.

[40] Huisman 46.

valuable by offsetting their traits of gangster heroism. Santino "Sonny" Corleone is of particular interest to viewers due to his contradictory imperfection; as part of the Corleone family, Sonny characterizes the traditional masculinity and strength of the Mafioso, but lacks Vito's morality and Michael's cultural intuition. Sollozzo, correspondingly, undoes traditional Sicilian values in representing that which is non-traditional to the Italian-American family.

Huisman argues that Sonny embodies the political ideology of neoconservatism in his conflict with Tom Hagen and his difference from Michael. Huisman states, "By contrast, Sonny's neoconservative approach is built around the strategically reckless notion that risk can be eliminated from life altogether through the relentless—and if necessary, preemptive, use of violence"[41] and, in so doing, identifies Sonny's simultaneous embodiment of Mafioso masculinity and inadequacy in the categories of morality and leadership (which Vito validates). Sonny is lovable with his "Cupid-shaped face,"[42] traditional through his fierce defensiveness for family, as audiences note in his defensive aggression towards his abusive brother-in-law Carlo,[43] and hyper-masculine in his promiscuity[44] and

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[41] Huisman 38.

[42] Puzo 71.

[43] Coppola.

[44] Promiscuity, particularly adultery, are traits which *The Godfather* associates with innate Italianhood. Puzo verifies this in writing Johnny Fontane as a character who "was too Italian, still too old-style. Naturally he had been unfaithful" (Puzo 171).

propensity for argument and brawling. Despite these traits that mimic the characteristics of the gangster hero, audiences might boil down his function within the Mafioso character system to the incident that curtails his imperfection.

Both Don Vito and the Italian-American community value the masculinity which Sonny embodies, as audiences recognize in statements such as Luca Brasi's, "And may their first child be a masculine child!" and Vito's ridicule of Johnny Fontane "What's the matter with you?...crying like a woman?,"[45] yet the Don foresees the ultimate destruction of his son through this very quality. Puzo writes, "He noted that his firstborn, masculine son was gazing through the window at a garden party. It was hopeless, Don Corleone thought. If he refused to be instructed, Santino could never run the family business."[46] The brutality with which Puzo and Coppola depict the death of Sonny enacts a violent destruction of the "old ways," and necessitates a reconsideration of more sensible "realism" which Michael then offers. After falling into the trap of Don Barzini, Sonny is brutally murdered; the scene of Vito Corleone visiting his son in the morgue brings together the world and values of the Mafioso Vito and the failure of his son:

> He [the Don] looked older, more shrunken than when Bonasera had seen him at the wedding, but he still radiated power. Holding his hand against his chest, he said to Bonasera, 'Well, old friend, are you ready to do me this

[45] Coppola.

[46] Puzo 33.

> service?'… On the embalming table was the bullet-smashed face of Sonny Corleone. The left eye drowned in blood had a star fracture in its lens. The bridge of his nose and left cheekbone were hammered into pulp. For a fraction of a second the Don put out his hand to support himself against Bonasera's body. 'See how they have massacred my son,' he said.[47]

In both the film and text, audiences become privy in this moment to the undoing of both Sonny and Vito through Sonny's recklessness. In particular, audiences note the irony of Vito's visit to the funeral home run by Amerigo Bonasera, who juxtaposes the hopefulness of Italian-America with the reexamination of tradition in the plot. With a name that is unmistakably hopeful for a more complete Italian-American identity, Amerigo Bonasera is positioned in subservience to the Don at the beginning of the story and "called back" for the Don's favor amidst shifting mafia violence. Through this juxtaposition, *The Godfather* calls audiences to a temporal comparison of differences between the powerful, God-like Don Vito from the beginning of the production, and the current Don who has experienced the death of his son and an attempt on his own life.

An analysis of these contradicting images illuminates the flickering of Vito's Mafioso authority. The Don, who "radiates power" yet is dwindling in life, is physically and emotionally undone by the vision of his fractured and "massacred"

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[47] Puzo 256-257.

family. Cleavage of the immediate family unit, so central to Sicilian culture and business, at once reiterates Vito's Sicilian heritage and marks his undoing. For the first time in the text, Puzo solicits "support" (if only "for a fraction of a second") from a source previously submissive to Vito's authority. Thus, the destruction of Sonny displaces the power of the Don and calls for a new approach; in short, the death of Sonny sets up Michael to complete the Mafioso. Sonny's death, along with the attempted assassination of the Don, begins a discourse that pins Sollozzo against the vengeful Michael Corleone.

Sollozzo, in an unsubtle manner, provides contrasting elements more discernibly characteristic of the anti-hero Mafioso, representing the non-ethnic Italian and the immoral. As a primary antagonist of the plot, his immorality is clear to audiences in such typical traits as disloyalty, trickery, and violations of *omertà*. His status as a mafia leader stems solely from his actual position as an illegitimate businessman and his application of *bella figura*. *The Godfather* makes Sollozzo's violation of Italian ethnicity clear to audiences, writing, "They call Sollozzo the Turk. Two reasons. He's spent a lot of time in Turkey and is supposed to have a Turkish wife and kids. Second. He's supposed to be very quick with the knife, or was, when he was young" (Puzo 70). The families literally designate him "the Turk" in response to his interracial marriage and biracial children, as well as his drug

ring, which violates Vito's moral code.[48] Thus, even within the confines of illegitimate business, "the Turk" appears illegitimate; he is not a member of "The Five Families," and attacks the Corleones through a system of treachery and betrayal. As the Turk speaks Italian in the film, Sollozzo embodies the turning of his back on Italian-style business, rather than Italian-American ritual, discursively "dulling" tradition and ushering in a phase of intense American greed through his sale of narcotics. In this way, the immoral and unethnic Sollozzo embodies that which Michael corrects by balancing of morality and Italian-Americanism, and represents the force that triggers the downfall of Sonny and Vito. Huisman remarks of Sollozzo and Sonny, "Where Tom sees Sollozzo as a reasonable if aggressive businessman whose concerns, like those of previous challengers, can be accommodated through compromise and conciliation, Sonny sees an existential threat—a clear and present danger that… must be swiftly cauterized."[49] The literary adjacency of Sonny and Sollozzo demonstrates the various realities of mafia

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[48] Puzo 70.

[49] Huisman 39-40. Similarly, mafia rival Phillip Tattaglia, in obtaining control without respect, serves to demonstrate that the Mafioso has a very specific kind of power. Puzo describes, "In a curious way, his almost victorious war against the Corleone Family had not won him the respect it desrerved. They knew his strength had come first from Sollozzo and then from the Barzini familyhad not w83). Thus, reliance outside the family unit – i.e. a non-traditional approach to mafia war—reinforces the idea that power is most respectable when achieved through Sicilian means.

power, and separately defines the gangster against the gangster hero. Further, the murder of Sollozzo at the hand of Michael Corleone suggests the dominion of an ethnic and traditional adaptation of mafia power over an immoral one.

Michael is lacking as a Mafioso figure only in that he is initially identified as the least masculine of the family, and the most assimilated American. His interest in Kate, an Irish-American, puts him into direct association with the non-Italian (here, the American) from the narrative's beginning—a quality that his character later corrects through temporary immigration to Sicily, marriage to Apollonia, the learning of Italian/Sicilian language. Similarly, at the beginning of the novel, Don Vito himself admits concern for his youngest son's masculinity. Puzo writes, "His skin was a clear olive-brown that would have been called beautiful in a girl. He was handsome in a delicate way. Indeed there had been a time when the Don had worried about his youngest son's masculinity."[50] Despite these concerns, Michael "puts to rest" any anxiety when he takes charge as the "realist" Mafioso at the conclusion of *The Godfather*. Huisman comments on Michael's realism, particularly in response to that of Tom Hagen, stating:

> Unlike Tom, whose labors as family lawyer have produced an exaggerated devotion to negotiation, and Sonny, whose position as untested heir apparent has produced a zeal for utilizing the family arsenal, Michael has no

[50] Puzo 15-16.

> formulaic fixation on a particular policy instrument. Instead, his over-riding goal is to protect the family's interests and save it from impending ruin by any and all means necessary. In today's foreign policy terminology, Michael is a realist.[51]

In this way, Michael represents the second-generation Italian-American, upon whose shoulders Italian family culture places the burden of ensuring the survival of tradition.

In his analysis of the role of the Italian family in the life of second-generation Italian-Americans, Morreale observes, "The Italian family played a complex role in the lives of the immigrants. On the one hand, it gave a sense of security in a generally hostile land. But Italian traditions often kept the second generation set in the working-class ways of their parents, who had grown up with the proverb, 'The little satisfies me, abundance overwhelms me.'"[52] *The Godfather* explicates this notion by demonstrating the ways in which the admittedly American Michael Corleone keeps alive the Italian-American value of family, as is visible in comments like that to his brother Fredo, "Freddie, you're my older brother, I have respect for you. But don't ever take sides with anybody against the Family again. I won't even mention it to the Don."[53] Michael's ability to mesh

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[51] Huisman 46.

[52] Morreale xvi.

[53] Puzo 386-387.

together the "old ways" and "new ways" is particularly notable in the following passage:

> 'I believe in my family,' he [Michael] said… 'I don't trust society to protect us, I have no intention of placing my fate in the hands of men whose only qualification is that they managed to con a bloc of people to vote for them. But that's for now. My father's time is done. The things he did can no longer be done except with a great deal of risk. Whether we like it or not the Corleone Family ahs to join that society.[54]

While perpetuating a strict *omertà* through his distrust of police authority, Michael simultaneously reveals his awareness of the need for change. In taking on the persona as temporary (and later permanent) godfather, Michael embodies traditional Sicilian values, and marries them with his American perspective.

Finally, as Ferraro writes, "The importance of *The Godfather* lies not in its creation of a double mythology but in the way that it takes the fusion of kinship and capitalist enterprise seriously. Its cultural significance lies not in the simultaneous appeals of 'family' and 'business' imagery but rather in the appeal of an actual structural simultaneity, the business of family."[55] Thus, Michael's ability to succeed as a Mafioso rides not on his ability to bring the separate identities together but indeed to embody them simultaneously. Michael unites the notion of

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[54] Puzo 363.

[55] Ferraro 19.

"business" and "family," appears as the simultaneous rather than blended Italian-American, and complements Vito's mafia traditions with a social awareness by understanding the necessity of recalibration in America. Huisman analyzes Michael in historical and political contexts and suggests, "To survive and succeed in this new environment, Michael knows the family will have to adapt; the policy instruments it relied on before will have to be recalibrated… Michael sees the time has come for wholesale strategic retrenchment."[56] *The Godfather* makes Michael's capacity to accomplish this most clear at the conclusion of the narrative, as Puzo writes "The bloody victory of the Corleone Family was not complete until a year of delicate political maneuvering established Michael Corleone as the most powerful Family chief in the United States."[57] The careful "maneuvers" of Michael to situate the family powerfully within the United States represents, as Huisman calls it, "retrenchment" within the new land and thereby completes the notion of the Mafioso as a character who might live with success and dignity on the hyphen of Italian-America.

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[56] Huisman 47.

[57] Puzo 438.